Developing a Theory of Change:

Practical Guidance

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDANCE AND EXAMPLES

PART 2

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

Contents

About This Guide

This part of *Developing a Theory of Change* builds on the concepts shared in the **PART I** overview, outlines concrete steps and provides exercises, examples and resources to help groups aiming to develop and use a theory of change. Since no two groups are exactly alike, there is no single development process or template that will best serve everyone.

PART 2 provides common elements and advice about ways of approaching theory of change development that can help ensure an inclusive and thoughtful process and a clear final product.

DOCUMENTATION TEMPLATES include fillable templates to record theory of change assumptions, components and audiences.

THIS PART OF THE GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Suggestions to help groups prepare
- Step-by-step guidance for developing and using a theory of change
- Guidance for making your theory of change a living tool
- **RESOURCES** for further learning and practice
- **TIPS** for communicating a theory of change

How the guide is structured

The guide is centered around **four core steps**, as illustrated on the following page.
(Note: The process begins at the end with thinking about the goal, then backs up to discover strategies and outcomes.)

- **Steps 1-3** provide guidance to help groups clarify and document their thinking about each component and explore the related underlying assumptions.

- **Step 4** offers questions to help groups take a step back and test the logic and relevance of the theory of change components and how they operate as a whole, interconnected theory; revisit key assumptions; and analyze external forces and context that may affect the theory of change.

Groups should document their thinking as they reach agreement about each component of their theory of change and underlying assumptions. An **optional documentation template** is referenced throughout the guide; the template is available as a downloadable PDF file that can be printed or filled out digitally.

THEORY OF CHANGE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

STEP 1

GOAL: Start by identifying the goals that reflect the intent of a program or strategy.

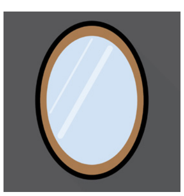
STEP 2

STRATEGIES: Next, identify strategies and activities that are expected to lead to goals.

STEP 3

OUTCOMES: Then clarify the outcomes that result from activities and lead to goals ("the messy middle").

STEP 4



REFLECTION:

- Test the logic and relevance of your theory
- Review and document key assumptions
- Analyze external forces and context

ALONG THE WAY

EXPLORE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS about your strategies, outcomes and goals, as well as overarching assumptions about the context of your work and the conditions that must exist to make progress.

Getting the most out of the process

The steps in this guide are most meaningful and effective when they are completed by a group of people whose members represent all stakeholders involved in the effort — for example, by members of a theory of change working group (see page 11). Involving multiple stakeholders throughout the theory of change development process also upholds the principle of inclusion and can help ensure that everyone's thinking is visible and clearly represented, and that the group articulates and examines assumptions.

While working through each step, groups may find it helpful to document ideas so they can be shared and kept for reference. In addition to using the provided documentation template, consider capturing notes and ideas or on sticky sheets that can be posted on a wall and moved around if you are working in person, or using an online collaboration tool if working virtually.

Groups enter the theory of change development process at different points with varying levels of clarity about their strategies, outcomes and goals. Depending on their starting point, groups may work through all the sections or focus on those that are most relevant.

What is meant by *underlying assumptions*? Why are they important to the process?

Groups working toward social change often operate with beliefs and assumptions that underlie how and why they do their work. These beliefs and assumptions may be explicit or implicit. Left unexamined, they can create confusion and misalignment in decision making. Throughout the theory of change development process, surfacing and interrogating these assumptions is a key part of making your thinking visible and strengthening shared understanding.

RESOURCE: See the Center for Evaluation Innovation's *Guidance on Developing Assumptions* for more information on the importance of and process for generating and testing assumptions.[i]

Set the Stage for Success

Taking time to adequately prepare to develop a theory of change helps ensure that groups move through the steps with greater intention and connection to purpose and that their theory of change process and product promote equity and inclusion. This section is intended to help groups to:

- identify the entry point and purpose for developing a theory of change;
- clarify users and audiences;
- design an inclusive process; and
- take helpful actions to prepare for the work ahead, such as developing clear roles, norms and a work plan.

Identify entry points

Why is a theory of change needed?

As groups set out to develop a theory of change, understanding the context for the work helps to clarify purpose and where to focus efforts. One way to approach for this is locating your entry point — **the challenge or opportunity that informs how a theory of change may be most useful.**

COMMON ENTRY POINTS FOR THEORY OF CHANGE

CONTEXT FOR ENTRY POINT	POSSIBLE PURPOSE OR FOCUS FOR THE THEORY OF CHANGE
At the beginning of a new effort, especially one that is meant to be collaborative or one that is complex and multifaceted	• Foster consensus about partners' common goals, activities and roles, and the outcomes to which different partners are expected to contribute. • Identify whether partners hold different beliefs or assumptions about their roles or about expected pathways to change that would be useful to name, address and resolve. • Articulate and foster consensus about important interim outcomes or clarify the "so that" relationships that link activities, outcomes and hoped-for goals or results.
In an ongoing effort, when stakeholders have different perspectives about expected pathways to change or when certain perspectives are missing	• Establish and implement an intentionally inclusive process. • Clarify differences in beliefs, assumptions or expectations about change. • Clarify and enhance understanding about root causes of the issues groups seek to address and the strategies most likely to be effective in addressing those root causes. • Identify outcomes of greatest interest to the people and communities at the center of the work.

table continued on following page

CONTEXT FOR ENTRY POINT	POSSIBLE PURPOSE OR FOCUS FOR THE THEORY OF CHANGE
When the external context is affecting the advancement of outcomes or goals, or windows of opportunity to advance goals have shifted	• Articulate assumptions about how the context is affecting or could affect the likelihood, the pace or the extent of change. • Articulate different ways that positive change might be demonstrated, depending on the context — for example, by holding the line in challenging circumstances or mitigating undesirable results. • Identify meaningful strategic shifts that reflect the context, such as prioritizing certain actions or outcomes.
When there is an interest or need to gather data that demonstrate how a program or strategy has contributed to meaningful outcomes or results, or to support learning among multiple stakeholders	• Help clarify questions related to aspects of the work, evidence of progress or assumptions that are important to pay attention to at a given time. • Inform the focus of data collection.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS TO HELP CLARIFY THE ENTRY POINT

- Why is developing a theory of change important or necessary right now? What do we hope our theory of change will help us do or do better? Points to consider:
  - Make thinking visible and realize alignment among different stakeholders
  - Unpack assumptions about the work or be more explicit about the logic of our chosen interventions and pathways to change
  - Ensure multiple perspectives (particularly those of community members) are considered and embedded in how we plan and implement our work
- What are opportunities to use a theory of change?
  - Communicate with others about the work
  - Guide implementation
  - Maintain alignment and agreement among those involved in a change effort
  - Inform evaluation and measurement; support testing of assumptions

Identify key audiences

Who will use the theory of change and how?

As noted in Part 1 of the guide, common audiences for a theory of change may include community members, those implementing a program or strategy, organizational leaders, board members and funders, among others. Identifying the audiences for a theory of change and capturing hopes and expectations for how they will use it helps groups illuminate opportunities to engage those audiences in the development process and remain focused on designing an end product that will be most useful. (See **Tips for Visualization and Documentation** on page 35 of this guide for more information.)

Document your key audiences and how you expect them to use your theory of change in the provided theory of change template or elsewhere.

Consider time frame and the vantage point for viewing change

At what level do we want to think about change?

The expected time frame for change will affect the level of detail you include in your theory of change. For example, a 10-year theory of change likely will include strategies and outcomes that sit at a higher level from the work and may not be as detailed as those in a two-year theory of change. Similarly, the type of change you are working towards informs the vantage point from which audiences will view your theory of change. For example, a project focused on systems change or policy change may include multiple strategies across multiple levels, making a higher-level elevation for all components of the theory of change more appropriate.

Different audiences may view your work from different perspectives. Before articulating the strategies and outcomes that you want to make clear and prominent in your theory of change, it will be helpful to determine the vantage point that can best communicate your theory of change.

VANTAGE POINT	DESCRIPTION	WHEN MOST USEFUL	RELEVANCE FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES
30,000 feet	Shows the broad landscape of what is being done to advance toward and achieve a long-term goal, typically a policy-related goal or a change in population or environmental condition	Most useful when describing work within a long-term time frame; will likely include multiple efforts of different partners that contribute to a long-term goal	Multiple funders (for general communication), partners (for alignment) and stakeholders who care about long-term results
10,000 feet	Shows a slightly lower-to-the-ground view; would likely encompass the breadth of work of one organization	Most useful if an organization is seeking to define its particular role or contribution within a broad effort (for example, what the organization itself brings to a partnership effort), or if an organization wishes to express how its own mix of internal strategies and outcomes are related and connected	Board members, staff teams, close-in partners and funders
1,000 feet	Illustrates the activities and intended results connected with a singular strategy or set of related actions	Most useful if an organization is involved in evaluation planning or trying to get a picture of what is likely to happen or change in a distinct near-term time period (such as the next one to two years)	Close-in partners and those implementing the work

TIP: Starting at a midpoint (around 10,000 feet) makes it easier to zoom in or out later as needed. Arriving at the right elevation for your theory of change will involve thinking about what is important to your target audiences, your strategies and what your organization ultimately hopes to achieve, as well as the degree to which your work happens in the context of collaboration and partnership with others who share similar goals.

Design for inclusion

How will the process prioritize voices that are often left out of the conversation about change?

PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT EQUITY WHEN DEVELOPING A THEORY OF CHANGE

Invite and meaningfully include the input and perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including those directly affected by the work. Soliciting perspectives from a range of those involved helps identify different views about how desired change is likely to happen and how it might be impeded, as well as the relative strength of logic and assumptions. Meaningfully engaging those who have the most to gain or lose from a strategy or its goals promotes trust and ensures that assumptions are clearer. Inclusive and participatory processes can also help mitigate groupthink, biases and generalizations about the issues that groups are trying to address. These processes often require time to be thoughtful about who is engaged, how they are engaged and how their input will be used to inform decisions. Seek balance in designing participatory processes that harness the value of multiple perspectives within time and budget constraints.

Avoid tokenizing. Inviting people to participate in a theory of change development process or review without true opportunities to influence decisions exacerbates discriminatory practices and risks harming people and communities and discouraging them from buying into the work and the vision for change. Seek to build authentic relationships and honor the shared stake in advancing goals rather than simply eliciting information or perfunctorily asking for approval. Acknowledge people's time and have a plan for compensating them.

Ensure that it is clear where authority and decision making rest. Be transparent about who influences and makes decisions. Set clear expectations so that everyone involved understands their level of influence and can choose how they would like to be engaged.

Sustain engagement with directly affected people and communities. For example, consider repeatedly inviting input from affected individuals or communities at key junctures — throughout the initial theory of change development process and, later, sharing data that provide a picture of progress.

Be aware of and sensitive to harms from past experiences. Actively work to articulate and understand how systemic factors — including discriminatory policies and practices — shape the context within which the work takes place. Without this effort, even well-intentioned groups can end up with a theory of change that reflects these same harmful factors. Taking time to learn about the history of a community or place and building trust with its people can inform respectful inclusion that is sensitive to potential past traumatic experiences. You also may consider assuring people that they can opt out of participatory processes if they no longer want to be involved for any reason.

PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Methods

The table below offers a few methods for engaging stakeholders at different levels of depth, along with important considerations. This is not an exhaustive list, and methods should be tailored to audience and purpose.

DEPTH OF ENGAGEMENT	METHOD	REQUIREMENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS
Promoting community involvement and building community power	• Participatory or collaborative model (involve those who have the most to gain or lose in the theory of change work group) • Advisory groups • Interactive workshops	• Requirements: - Clear structure and process for decision making - Adequate time to be built into the process - Thoughtful examination of how authority is distributed across stakeholders and how to equalize decision making • Considerations: - Stakeholders need to have time and capacity to participate, and they must trust each other. Consider whether it is possible to bring in existing relationships. - Deeper engagement can harm relationships if not done thoughtfully. - Acknowledge the time commitment involved in deeper engagement. If possible, find ways to compensate people for their time. - Account for language and accessibility needs.
Gathering and integrating community input	• Surveys or polling • Focus groups or interviews • Community forums	• Requirements: - Ability to connect with people who can represent different stakeholder voices and perspectives - Clear communication about what will be done with input and how input will be integrated into decisions • Considerations: - Make it easy for different audiences to offer their input. For example, keep surveys brief, offer language translation as needed, and make in-person forums accessible (such as by offering childcare or ASL interpretation). - Acknowledge people's time. Compensate them if possible.
Informing community	• Fact sheets • Presentations • Online content (videos, social media, newsletters and/or blogs)	• Requirements: - Ability to publish or share information with audiences outside your group • Considerations: - One-way communication may be less helpful for building trust and deepening connections with stakeholders.

RESOURCE: For more information on meaningful engagement of stakeholders, see *The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership.*[2]

RESOURCE: For more guidance on stakeholder analysis, see:

- The Casey Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*[3] *— Step 2: Engage affected populations and stakeholders*
- Hivos's *Theory of Change Thinking in Practice: A Stepwise Approach,* p. 93[4]

REFLECTION QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE DECISION MAKING

- How will we make decisions and determine choices and priorities? How will we balance diverse and nuanced input? If consensus or agreement are not reached, who will make the ultimate decision?
- How can we clarify how decisions are made?
- To what extent will input from communities and affected groups carry equal or different weight from the input, preferences or priorities of others, including organizational leaders or funders?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Who has something at stake in our work and should be included in our theory of change development? Who has influence or decision-making authority over how we carry out our work? Who stands to gain or lose if our work is successful?
- What are opportunities to build authentic, sustained relationships with community members and honor their shared stake in realizing a goal?
- How can we invite and meaningfully include perspectives of communities and groups most affected by planned strategies or the goals we seek? How will we be accountable to these communities?
- How will we recognize people's time spent engaging with the theory of change development process? How will we compensate them, financially or through other means?
- What are opportunities to avoid repeating harms to communities we seek to engage?

Helpful actions to prepare

How can we hit the ground running?

IDENTIFY A THEORY OF CHANGE WORKING GROUP

Many groups will set up a working group responsible for shaping and leading the theory of change development process. Effective working groups often take time up front to clarify roles and expectations about the process and timeline. The following considerations may inform how the working group will operate:

- Who is going to be responsible for advancing the work?
- How will the group make decisions?
- Has the group communicated about the time commitments required for its members?
- How will the group facilitate discussions?
- How will the group work to ensure different viewpoints are represented and heard in discussion?
- How will we support brainstorming and refining our ideas to move through areas of divergence and come together?

RESOURCE: For more information on moving through divergence towards convergence in a group decision- making process, see Sam Kaner's *Diamond of Participatory Decision-Making.*[5]

GATHER AND REVIEW EXISTING DOCUMENTATION OF STRATEGIES AND GOALS

Documents could include (but are not limited to):

- current or previous theories of change or logic models;
- write-ups of your mission, vision and values;
- formal and informal documents that describe your strategies and how you carry out your work;
- materials or data that describe how your points of intervention were determined; and
- news articles; stories from staff, partners or community members; or other materials that illuminate your ways of working or your beliefs about how change happens.

SEEK AGREEMENT ABOUT LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTS

The following considerations may help support shared understanding of language and concepts that will be frequently used and referenced when developing a theory of change:

- Is our language or terminology about individuals, groups or communities based on strengths and assets?
- Are we avoiding harmful words or terms? Understanding that language has power and history, have we considered the historic bias that might be reflected in our adopted terms?
- What is our level of understanding about the meaning of language in our work and in our theory of change?
- Are we clear about the words we are going to use to delineate between action and change?
- How will we talk about racial equity, inclusion, diversity and the role of culture in our theory of change process and product?

RESOURCE: See the Casey Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide* – Step 1: Establish an Understanding of Race Equity and Inclusion Principles.

DEVELOP A WORK PLAN

The time and resources you'll need to develop a theory of change may depend on the complexity of the work you do and who is included in the process. The process typically is not something that groups can tackle in two hours. Many groups need to have multiple conversations. Developing a work plan early in the process can help set expectations for the cadence of the work and establish how much time will feel sufficient to go through the steps outlined in this guide.

Some overarching planning considerations include the following:

- Who and how many people will be included in the working group?
- Who should be engaged in each phase of work? What will help make it possible for stakeholders to participate (such as considering their availability, making meetings accessible and providing compensation)?
- Are strategies and outcomes clearly defined at the outset? Do we need clearer definitions?
- Is the theory of change being developed in conjunction with a broader strategic planning process?
- How much funding and staff time will we need to dedicate to meaningfully support this work?

TIMING FOR YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE PROCESS

PHASE OF WORK	PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS
Preparation **One to two months**	• Clarify who will be involved in the working group and the roles of working group members, including who will lead.
Developing and refining content (goals, strategies, outcomes, underlying assumptions) **Two to six months** If components of the work are not well articulated, you may need more time.	• Are components of the theory of change well defined at the outset? • How many opportunities will be offered to provide feedback? • Who and how many people will provide feedback, and how?
Communicating your theory of change **Ongoing at intervals (as the theory of change is refined and strengthened over time)**	• Clarify who will be involved in communications and who is going to lead communications. • Clarify what kind of graphic or visual model you will need to support communications, and what kind of narrative component is useful.
Reflecting on data and experiences to refine your theory of change **Ongoing at intervals — quarterly, semi-annually or annually (depending on the pace of change)**	• Clarify who will be involved in reflecting on data and findings, who will prompt and facilitate reflection and who will determine adjustments and refinements.

What is our goal? Who or what will change? What conditions will be present? What will be true if our work is completely successful?

Step 1: *Identify Goals*

This section will help you identify goals and increase alignment about why goals are important and how you are uniquely positioned to advance them.

Clarify goals

Goals are often ambitious, large-scale, significant changes likely to occur years into the future. When organizations or groups are involved in implementing a program or strategy, goals are at the center of the work and all actions hope to advance them. Theory of change development often starts by clarifying goals, then working backward to identify how those goals will be realized.

Goals are typically described as aspirational changes, and may encompass:

- **changes for a group of people or a community,** such as changes in capabilities, behavior or relationships or in conditions of health, safety or well-being; or
- **changes in systems,** including social structures (relationships among stakeholders, norms and narratives); federal, state or local policies; and practices or ways of working.

As your group reaches agreement about your goal or goals, write them out as short statements using the separate documentation templates provided with this guide

EXAMPLE GOAL STATEMENTS

WHO OR WHAT CHANGES	EXAMPLE GOALS
• Conditions for certain groups of people • Conditions for a whole population (people or other species) • Habitats or ecosystems • Conditions in a geographic region — school district, town, city, county or state • Institutional mindsets or practices • Social structures • Policies	• Youth in foster care across King County graduate from high school at the same rate as their classmates. • People who are low income being served by Cristal Health experience improved health and wellness outcomes. • All students in Lake County are reading at grade level by the end of third grade. • Ecological systems are healthy throughout Hawaii. • Common public narratives about beneficiaries of safety net resources are respectful and emphasize dignity. • Policies ensure youth of color can overcome the obstacles of poverty, neglect, abuse and discrimination and achieve their potential.

Achieving goals typically requires a combination of efforts by many different actors over a defined period of time, as well as favorable external conditions. While they are aspirational, goals also should be grounded in current knowledge and context. It should be plausible that a proposed combination of efforts could result in achievement of goals by a certain time in the future (for example, three to five years, 10 years, 20 years). (See the Exercise on the next page for a creative approach to brainstorming your goals.)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS TO HELP CLARIFY GOALS

- What is the alternate future we want to see?
- What big, meaningful changes do we want our cumulative efforts to contribute to so we can realize the future we envision? What do we hope will be true or different if our work is successful?
- Who or what do we hope will experience a meaningful change because of our work? What change would most matter to them?
- Will the people who are expected to benefit from our work have a say in determining what the goal is or why it is important?
- When would we expect to see this change realized?

RESOURCE: For more guidance on conceptualizing different kinds of change that may be needed to reach the goal, see the “four dimensions of change” framework provided on p. 90 of Hivos's *Theory of Change Thinking in Practice: A Stepwise Approach.*

Explore underlying assumptions related to your goal

As you start out and begin identifying your goals, practice surfacing and documenting your underlying assumptions, beliefs and rationale for decisions. The goals you identify in this step will anchor the following two steps of the process, and it is important to take time to unpack different perspectives about why the goals are important, how near or far into the future they might be reached and what conditions would need to change to achieve them. It is also important to not get stuck at this step; some of these questions may be clarified in later steps of the process.

RESOURCE: For more information on the importance of and process for generating and testing assumptions, see the Center for Evaluation Innovation's *Guidance on Developing Assumptions*[6].

Exercise

The following exercise offers a creative approach to clarifying thinking about the big goal of your work.

Brainstorm future news headlines about what you have accomplished

This exercise can be helpful when groups do not already have well-defined goals or strong consensus about what the goals should be. It can be facilitated in person or virtually and is an opportunity to flex your creative muscles.

Instructions

Imagine it is five to 10 years from now, and you are a journalist writing an editorial article about your group or organization.

- Take a few minutes to write out headlines for the article that describe what your work has accomplished or contributed to.
- Take turns in your group sharing your headlines and what led you to write them.

Results

You may land on a great goal statement by the end of the activity, or just make progress toward identifying important components to include in your goals.

What is our intervention approach? What are the actions we will undertake in support of the goal?

Step 2: *Identify Strategies and Activities*

This section focuses on articulating actions and provides guidance for clearly identifying strategies and activities that groups will carry out to advance their goals.

Clarify strategies and activities that address your goal

Strategies are related sets of activities that reflect chosen points of intervention — such as providing direct services, implementing campaigns, building the field or influencing social structures, systems, research or collaborative efforts. Strategies typically remain relevant even if groups shift their focus or their specific tactics to respond to different issues. Documenting strategies and activities for your theory of change could look different depending on whether these components are well known and well defined or still being conceptualized and developed. (See the next Exercise.)

Strategies in a theory of change may reflect the work of an organization or group differently than how it is reflected in individual job descriptions, staffing plans or departments. For example, some activities carried out by the same person or role may be divided across multiple, distinct strategies depending on what the strategies aim to accomplish. Groups may choose to include strategies and activities they are currently carrying out, or those they are beginning to try out or considering for the future.

As your strategies and activities become clear, document them using the separate documentation templates or in another place.

TIP: If strategies are not clear at the outset, it can help to first describe your activities, then organize them into groups of related actions or actions that all drive toward the same purpose. Thinking at this stage also does not need to be perfect or final; prompts are included in later steps of this guide to help further refine strategies.

EXAMPLE STRATEGIES AND RELEVANT ACTIVITIES

STRATEGIES	RELEVANT ACTIVITIES
Strategic communications	• Develop messaging (define the problem, name and frame, message test). • Disseminate messaging (identify target audiences, segment audiences, distribute messages through relevant channels).
Capacity building among grantees or community partners	• Provide training and technical assistance. • Offer leadership development support, such as coaching or mentoring. • Bring together and support communities of practice.
Building effective coalitions	• Identify organizations with strong relationships and reputations in priority communities. • Bring together community partners working on issues of common interest. • Promote alignment among different actors in specific areas (for example, understanding roles, agreeing on common messages, coordinating action).
Advocating for policy decisions or actions	• Educate policymakers and their staff about issues and potential policy solutions. • Develop policy proposals. • Review and comment on policy opportunities or decisions.

Explore underlying assumptions related to your strategies

As you identify your strategies, it is important to clarify why you believe the proposed points of intervention and activities have the potential to advance goals while furthering equity. For example, strategies should reflect areas of action that implementers are well positioned to carry out, that address the root causes that may be preventing some from achieving goals and that are appropriate to the cultural backgrounds of those participating. Taking the time to make explicit assumptions about strategies helps illuminate important information about how stakeholders believe areas of action can lead to desired goals and promotes productive discussion about how strategies uphold equity.

Exercise

The following exercise can help groups clarify their thinking about their strategies and activities.

Use backward mapping to identify effective strategies

Backward mapping is a technique for designing new initiatives or examining existing initiatives to promote racial equity by uncovering the root causes of inequities. When used with a theory of change, backward mapping invites organizations to take an alternative perspective in determining what outcomes contribute to the changes they want to see and what strategies and interventions will get them there. The following seven steps are a guide to answering the question, *"What will it really take for us to achieve the long-term change we want?"*

Instructions

STEP 1 Define the problem by articulating the conditions that you want to change.

STEP 2 Ask questions to surface possible causes that have created the problem defined in Step 1.

- What are possible causes? Who is affected and why? Are some groups more affected than others? Why? Where is this more likely to happen and why? How is the problem showing up and why?

STEP 3 List the possible causes suggested in Step 2.

STEP 4 Uncover root causes by asking questions to drill down into the possible causes defined in Step 3.

- What are the root causes? What's behind the possible causes? How are systemic biases and inequities being expressed? Are there policies or other conditions that are making this worse? Is there a historical context that is still being felt or seen?

STEP 5 List the root causes and repeat Steps 4 and 5 until early and intermediate preconditions of the problem have been adequately described.

STEP 6 Identify interventions that address the root causes described in Step 5. Step 6 helps group clarify the kinds of interventions that they are well positioned to undertake and that are most likely to help make progress toward their goal.

- How can you respond? How can your organization address the root causes of the identified problem? What would prevent or reduce the likelihood of this continuing to happen?

STEP 7 Articulate outcomes that you expect to result from the interventions identified in Step 6. (Note: More guidance on identifying and articulating outcomes is provided in the next section of this guide.)

- What changes will this intervention produce? How will this intervention address root causes and ultimately change the condition?

TIP: While included this an exercise in this section, backward mapping may be a useful process in other steps of the process.

RESOURCES: For guidance to support the backward mapping approach:

- See the Aspen Institute's *Constructing A Racial Equity Theory of Change: A Practical Guide for Designing Strategies to Close Chronic Racial Outcome Gaps*,[7] from which this exercise was adapted.
- Prior to implementing strategies, Racial Equity Impact Assessment[8] can be used prior to implementing strategies to help forecast how a proposed action or decision will likely affect different racial and ethnic groups.
- See steps 3–6 of the Casey Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*.
- See the Casey Foundation's *Introduction to the Results Count Path to Equity: A Guide to the Accountability for Equitable Results Framework.*[9]

What near-term changes do we believe will result from our actions? How will those changes create progress toward our goal?

Step 3:
Clarify the "Messy Middle": Link Strategies to Outcomes and Goals

Having identified goals and the actions you will take to help realize them, you are now ready to identify the pathways of change that you believe connect strategies to goals. This section is designed to help you 1) identify the near-, medium- and longer-term outcomes and 2) refine the logical connections between your actions, intended outcomes and goals.

Identify meaningful outcomes likely to precede goals

Outcomes are changes that happen among people, within organizations or in community conditions. Some changes can happen overnight, some take weeks or months and others take years or even decades. Clearly identifying short- and medium-term outcomes helps bring into focus the changes or new conditions that enable achievement of longer-term outcomes and goals. Short- and medium-term outcomes are sometimes referred to as *interim outcomes*.

OUTCOMES

The following table shows common types of outcomes based on who or what is expected to change.

WHO OR WHAT WOULD EXPERIENCE A CHANGE?	WHAT MIGHT CHANGE?
Individuals	• Awareness • Attitudes/beliefs • Behaviors • Skills
Families	• Engagement • Social connections • Stability
Communities	• Norms • Narratives • Availability of or access to public resources • Will to address certain issues • Levels of engagement in an issue • Physical conditions
Organizations	• Capacity and resources • Internal policies • Mindsets and practices • Leadership • Availability of data
Systems	• Policies • Levels of funding and resources • Efficacy and equity of program or policy implementation

IDENTIFY WHO AND WHAT CHANGES TO FORM OUTCOMES

Clear outcome statements typically contain the following three components:

- **Direction of change or desired effect** (increased, decreased, maintained, improved, greater, fewer)
- **What changes** (attitude, practice, perception, knowledge, skill, behavior, health, policy, systems)
- **For whom** (individuals, program participants, population group, community, client, organization, system)

TIP: Avoid combining more than one change into a single outcome statement.

The table below is an example of one way to organize the components of an outcome noted above. If helpful, replicate this table and practice crafting clear outcomes as you work on generating and refining outcomes at this stage.

DESCRIBING CHANGE

WHAT IS THE CHANGE OR DESIRED EFFECT?	IN WHAT?	AMONG WHOM OR IN WHAT ENTITY?
Increased	Awareness	The public
Fewer	Silos	Community-based service providers
Maintained	Funding	Organization
New	Skills	Emerging leaders
More regular	Use of data	Decision makers
Greater	Coverage	Local media
Changes in	Policies	The state
Strengthened	Partnerships	Grantees
Improved	Health	Children

As you generate outcomes, begin documenting them in the separate documentation templates or in another place.

These components can be combined to form outcomes:

- Increased rate of families maintaining a stable residence
- Increased diversity of donors supporting an issue
- Improved processes for data-informed decision making among staff
- Increased engagement of parents in schools
- Strengthened alignment among grantees supporting an issue
- Increased collaboration among partners developing a solution

TIPS:

- Be careful not to confuse outcomes with outputs — which describe how many times an event occurred or how much of something was produced, at what frequency and over what duration. (For example, outputs might include how many meetings were held during a grant period or how many reports were published each quarter.) Outputs describe actions rather than changes resulting from those actions. While outputs can be useful to document and track, they are less useful for the purposes of theory of change development. If outputs come up, are the activities they represent captured in your strategies?
- While generating outcomes, it is helpful to pause and ask: Have we considered who does not benefit from or who could be harmed by our work? Are there other unintended changes or consequences that might result? Have we considered how intersecting identities show up or are missing from the outcomes we have developed?

RESOURCES: For more information on outcomes suitable to different kinds of work, see the following resources:

- For examples of systems outcomes, see ORS Impact and Hawai'i Community Foundation's guide: *Impact = Influence + Leverage + Learning: A Formula for Change*.[10]
- For examples of policy advocacy outcomes, see the Casey Foundation's *A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy*.[11]
- For approaches that reflect different potential trajectories of change based on common types of status quo, see Democracy Fund's *Six Models for Understanding Impact*.[12]

Clarify linkages

The theory of change development process is especially useful for delineating and getting to agreement about what is sometimes called the "messy middle", meaning:

- the often hard-to-name, short-term outcomes that directly result from implementation of activities;
- the set of interim outcomes that contribute to or help advance a large-scale goal; and
- the key assumptions and beliefs held about these short- and medium-term outcomes.

TIPS: As the name suggests, the messy middle is often where the process gets more complex. The following suggestions can help groups manage this complexity:

- Find ways to make your thinking visible as you go through this step. (See the iceberg metaphor exercise at the end of this section, which uses a visual metaphor to help you identify interim outcomes.)
- Take opportunities to pause and ask where your thinking is clear or not as clear, and where there may be unspoken assumptions.
- Lean on your collaborators to gather multiple perspectives. Resist the urge to take shortcuts if there are divergent opinions about something.

The effort you put into this step often leads to rewarding insights and new understandings about your work.

"SO-THAT CHAIN" THINKING

One effective approach to figuring out the messy middle is to develop "so-that chains." So-that chains help connect strategies to the goal through a series of logical, sequential changes. Creating chains for each strategy can allow for effective articulation and communication of expected changes resulting from each strategy, and of how the strategies together contribute to goals. Multiple strategies also are likely to lead to common intermediate outcomes on the pathway to goals.

In the example on this page, notice that the chain of statements moves from knowledge to behavior of providers and from the quality of programs to the well-being of children in the community. Each link is a logical sequence of events showing how implementation of a specific strategy contributes to broad changes. (See the "so-that chain" activity at the end of this section.)

Explore underlying assumptions about the messy middle

Different assumptions may emerge about who a large-scale effort is meant to serve or support and how; whether or how proposed interventions are relevant, respectful and meaningful to people and communities; and whether or how proposed change pathways are free of biases and other harms. When the theory of change development process is inclusive, delineating the messy middle can spark important and sometimes uncomfortable conversations that may call attention to where the theory of change upholds and advances equity — and where it fails to do so.

The following section provides questions designed to help you assess the logic and relevance of your theory of change. Working through these questions as a group can help surface underlying assumptions and check where partners agree or disagree about those assumptions.

What to do if you get stuck

While theory of change development often involves simply documenting more explicitly what people already know and are doing, it is also typical to get a bit stuck — you can't see how to get out of the morass of many different outcomes and elements, you aren't sure where to go next in the process or you just lose some steam. This is a common experience for groups going through a facilitated process that involves moving from more divergent thinking. Working through a "groan" zone could lead to a "grow" zone.[13] Here are a few ways to help you diagnose what's happening, as well as some ideas of how to proceed.

Ways your group might be getting stuck

- You're having a hard time doing so-that chains or generating meaningful outcomes. This might mean that the activities and strategies have too many different approaches within them, so it's hard to parse out what is changing as a result.
- The group is not getting any juice or enlightenment from the process. This might mean that the vantage point of the work is too high level. The conversation is not getting specific enough, and it is too easy to gloss over where there might be differences of opinion or nuances to untangle.
- The outcomes feel like "fruit salad" or even a "yard sale" with things that are wildly different — you cannot figure out how they fit together. This might mean people are generating outcomes from different vantage points.
- You are having difficulty generating any content. Sometimes the group is fundamentally confused or lacks strategic thinking.

Things to try

- Revisit your strategies and activities. Practice breaking out discrete actions that you carry out and explain how those actions contribute to the changes you want to see. Try to describe the actions in a new way to see if it leads to breakthrough thinking.
- Establish a common vantage point. Try for the 10,000-foot level if things seem too conceptual, or make sure everything seems at the same level. (See page 7 for more information on vantage points.)
- Work from the other direction. Place the goal at the top of the theory of change and the strategies at the bottom. Or work from right to left. Sometimes a fresh perspective can help.
- Try a different technique for gathering input from work group members or other stakeholders. Some approaches may resonate more than others.
- Approach the technique in a new way — working quietly as individuals, or in small groups instead of large groups.
- Acknowledge that it's normal to have times that feel hard or like a slog. That can be part of the process to get to greater convergence and agreement.
- Take a break and revisit the work after a few days or weeks to allow ideas to develop or openness to other viewpoints to emerge.

Exercises

The following exercises can help groups clarify their thinking about outcomes and the messy middle.

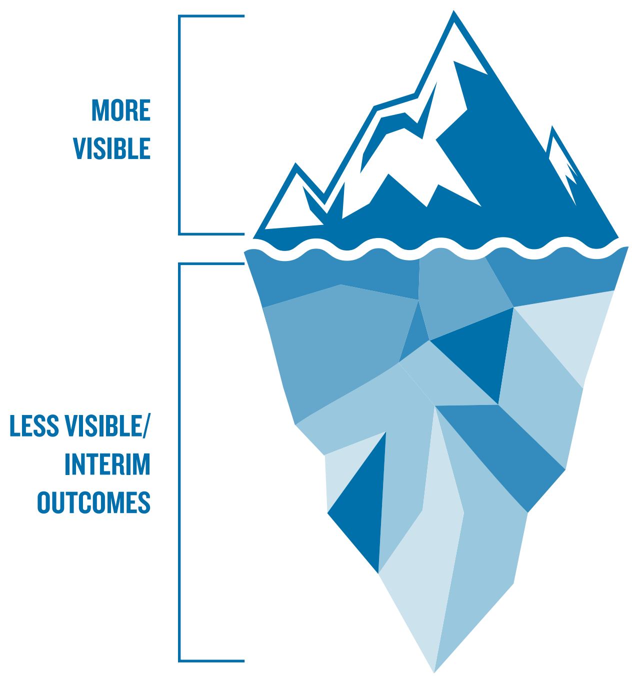
Use the iceberg metaphor to identify important, less visible outcomes

When working toward an ambitious social-change goal, it is often easier to think about the tangible, observable changes that you want to see happen than it is to identify the underlying conditions that help make those changes more possible to realize (interim outcomes). The visual metaphor of an iceberg can serve as a useful tool to help unpack these changes.[14] The peaks visible above the surface of the water are supported by a much larger mass of ice underneath that is not immediately apparent. Groups pursuing advocacy strategies or other efforts focused on systems change may find this metaphor especially helpful.

Instructions

Set-up

Draw a simple image of an iceberg. (You may use a large whiteboard, a large sheet of paper taped to a wall or a digital image pasted into an online collaborative workspace.) The image does not have to be pretty; it just needs to depict visible peaks above a water line and space below the water representing the large, hidden portion of the iceberg. (Note: Groups may also choose to use other relevant visual metaphors for this activity, such as trees and roots.)



Activity

Think about the outcomes you hope to achieve by carrying out your strategies. Using sticky half sheets of paper and a pen or text boxes if working digitally, complete the following steps:

- Write down **outcomes that you can clearly observe** (that is, changes you can see, hear or read about) and place them above the water line next to the peaks of the icebergs.
  - Examples include *favorable policy change*, *increased graduation rates*, *increased acres of watershed protected from development*, *decreased rates of youth incarceration*.
- Write down **outcomes that are harder to observe** (that is, the conditions that help make visible changes possible) and place them below the water line.
  - Examples include *strengthened relationships between communities and decision makers*, *increased belief in the importance of quality pre-K education*, *increased awareness of factors that affect water quality*, *improved social-emotional health among high-school age youth*.

Discussion

Step back and examine the placement of outcomes on the iceberg. Discuss as a group what it means for your work and your theory of change:

- Did you identify any new outcomes?
- Is there agreement or disagreement about where any outcomes were placed?
- Do you have any new insights about the relationship between outcomes that are hard to see and those that are easy to see?
- Did the group clarify any assumptions about how change happens?

Documentation

For some groups, the process of identifying and organizing outcomes in this way can be clarifying and valuable in and of itself, and no documentation is necessary. Others may use the results of this activity as inputs for developing so-that chains (see below) or for documenting outcomes or assumptions in the theory of change template.

Create so-that chains

Creating so-that chains is a way to think through the logical sequence of short-term, interim and long-term outcomes that you hope or expect to occur as a result of each of your strategies.

Instructions

Going through your strategies one at a time, complete the following prompts to fill in the blanks:

- "We carry out [*strategy*] so that [*outcome*] occurs for [*individuals, families, organizations or communities*]."
- "We want [*outcome identified above*] to occur so that [*outcome*] occurs for [*individuals, families, organizations, or communities*]."

Repeat this process for each outcome you identify until you have linked the strategy to your goal. If conducting this exercise with an in-person group, use different colored sticky half sheets of paper to write strategies and outcomes and post them on a large wall. These sheets can be arranged sequentially on the wall to reflect the connection between strategies and outcomes and the flow of outcomes toward the goal. Groups also can facilitate this exercise using an online collaboration software platform.

Reflection

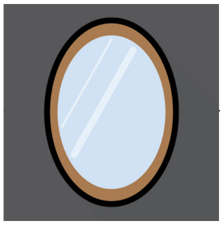
Developing individual so-that chains for each strategy creates the blocks for building a complete theory of chain outcome map. Once several so-that chains have been generated:

- look for points of interconnection or similar outcomes across different chains;
- collapse repeated outcomes into a single outcome;
- rearrange outcomes across multiple so-that chains to create a logical sequence (short-term, interim and long-term outcomes); and
- revise language so that outcomes are expressed at similar levels of detail.

Note: It is normal for this process to be complex or messy.

Documentation

Results of this activity can be documented in the separate documentation templates or in another place. Some groups may also find it helpful at this stage to begin thinking about the design of their theory of change product. (See "Communicating Your Work: Tips and Examples" on page 35 for guidance and examples.)



Does the sequence of outcomes flow logically as they extend toward the goal?

Step 4:
Step Back and Reflect on the Whole Picture

Once you arrive at a solid working draft of the theory of change — with initial thinking about strategies, outcomes, goals and key underlying assumptions in some form — this section can help you step back and assess how all the component parts fit together as a whole. This often requires balancing attention on the details and the big picture at the same time. Working groups might consider assigning different members the role of testing the theory at various vantage points while going through this step.

Test the logic and relevance of your theory

Discussing the following questions can help confirm that the relationships between your strategies and outcomes follow clear logic and are relevant to helping you reach the goal you seek. It might also be helpful to engage others to help review, pressure test and provide feedback on outcomes and assumptions that your group believes create the pathway to goals.

- Do short-term outcomes logically flow from identified strategies? Are the short-term outcomes that appear in our theory of change the changes that are most likely to happen first?
- Does the sequence of short-term, interim and long-term outcomes flow logically as they extend toward the goal?
- Are the outcomes realistic and reasonable? Does it seem logical to assert that the identified strategies will influence the outcomes shown in our theory of change?

- Are there outcomes for which we do not have a strategy? If so, does this suggest a new area of work to consider? Are we well positioned to take on this work? Are there others who are already doing this work or who would be better suited to do so?
- Are the strategies and outcomes in our theory of change meaningful and compelling to our target audiences? Are our target audiences' needs and interests sufficiently addressed? Have we provided opportunities for their input to be considered?
- Given our assumptions about the current context within which our work will take place, can we reasonably expect that things will change as shown in our theory of change?

If the answer to any of these questions is "No" or if you are uncertain, you may need to revisit your assumptions about the linkages on the path toward your big goal statement. The discussion questions below can help.

Review and document key assumptions

The following questions may help groups reflect on, refine and prioritize any assumptions that came up while working through each step of the guide.

REVIEW ASSUMPTIONS RELATED TO GOALS

Use these questions to help clarify important underlying beliefs and assumptions about your goal.

- Why does the goal matter to us and to different stakeholders (including those who stand to gain or lose the most if we reach or don't reach our goal)?
- What evidence supports the importance of this goal (such as research, literature, community experiences)?
- How does the goal reinforce or challenge the status quo?
- What does our goal imply about the status quo and the change we are working toward?

RESOURCE: For more information on understanding the trajectory of change that is being sought, see the Democracy Fund's *Six Models for Understanding Impact*.

Based on your responses these questions, document your assumptions using the separate documentation templates or in another place.

REVIEW ASSUMPTIONS RELATED TO STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Use these questions to help clarify important underlying beliefs and assumptions about your strategies and activities.

- What actions matter most to advancing the goal we identified? What is the evidence for these actions actions, or why do we think they matter most?
- Are there conditions that must be true for us to achieve the outcomes we expect from our activities and strategies? What barriers are in the way?
- What is the focus of our strategies? Are they aimed at affecting people, systems or both?
- Who is meant to benefit from our efforts? Who might be left out or potentially harmed?
- To what extent do our strategies and activities respond to and reflect the culture of the individuals, families, groups, communities or populations involved or whom our work aims to benefit?

REVIEW ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE MESSY MIDDLE

Use these questions to help clarify important underlying beliefs and assumptions about how strategies and outcomes are linked and form a pathway to reach your goal.

- Why do we believe actions will lead to near-term changes?
- Are there certain outcomes or relationships between outcomes that our theory most hinges on? If those outcomes are not met, would we still have a viable path toward reaching our goal?

Reflect and Document

- What actions do we need to take based on what we discussed? For example:
  - Do we need to gather more evidence or research to support the importance of our goals and the appropriateness of our chosen strategies?
  - Do we need to revise or refine our goal statement, the set of strategies or activities we identified or our outcomes?
  - Do we need to clarify linkages between outcomes (that is, why we believe a given change will help lead to other changes)?
- Have we adequately documented our thinking and rationale for decisions about our work to help us communicate about our work with internal or external audiences?

You may also consider whether discussions raised issues that were important to discuss in the moment but are not necessary to preserve or document for the long term.

> **You may use the separate documentation templates to capture notes about external forces or document them in another place.**

Analyze external forces and context

Having a clear working draft of your theory of change also presents an important opportunity to discuss and document the external conditions and factors beyond your control. These conditions can enable or pose significant challenges to the pathways of change you have identified.

REVIEW ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT EXTERNAL FORCES

- In what context or external environments does our theory of change operate? What are our assumptions about that context or external environment?
- What external conditions would help enable our ability to achieve our outcomes? What external conditions would be hostile to our work? For example, are there individuals, groups, institutions or systems that are working in alignment or at cross-purposes to our theory of change? How might we adapt if presented with challenges from these forces?
- What would we need to monitor along the way to know what conditions we are facing? What are signals of change that we need to pay attention to?

REFLECT AND DOCUMENT

- What actions do we need to take based on what we discussed? For example, do we need to revisit the strategies, activities, outcomes, goal or assumptions? Do we need to clarify linkages between outcomes? Do we need to gather more evidence to support our theory? Are voices or perspectives missing that we need to include to help test the validity of our theory?
- Have we adequately documented our thinking and rationale for decisions so they can be used for future reference or for sharing our work with internal or external audiences?

Theory of Change in Action

This section highlights how a theory of change can provide value when used as a living tool and offers guidance for groups to practice regularly reflecting on their theory of change.

Tips to support use and reflection

As mentioned in **PART I**, there are several ways that a well-developed theory of change can add value to an organization's work.

- For **people and communities** directly involved in the work, a theory of change can be a tool that ensures clear communication and helps to build trust.
- For **those implementing a program or strategy**, a theory of change helps clearly convey the strategic approach, inherent assumptions and values and core hypotheses about how change will occur. Besides helping foster alignment within a broad collective effort, a theory of change also can serve as a common reference point, helping to keep the work on track and implementers and funders accountable for results.
- For those seeking to **measure progress**, a theory of change can serve as a useful guide for evaluation.
- For **organizational leaders, board members and funders,** a theory of change helps make clear what is expected to change and by when, what constitutes success, what level of change can reasonably be achieved within a certain time frame, and what are critical assumptions about change, including assumptions about how the theory of change upholds and prioritizes equity.

When regularly used as a reference point, a theory of change becomes even more valuable by helping groups to assess and understand opportunities to calibrate along the way. Periodic reflection can shed light on implementation of a program or strategy, how and whether change is happening and how working assumptions are holding up. The learning and clarity that such reflection provides can inform decisions and actions that can strengthen strategy implementation, accelerate progress and maximize the likelihood of realizing results. Reflection on their theory of change can also help groups communicate about their work and their contributions with more precision and clarity.

CADENCE FOR USE AND REFLECTION

As new experiences, data and knowledge become available, groups can regularly reflect on activities, implementation, progress and realization of key outcomes, and adjust implementation or their expectations about near-term change. Periodically, it may be valuable to step back and take stock of the overall vision for change, and, if needed, consider refinements. It is common to do this every three to five years, although the frequency will depend on the group's appetite for reflection and learning, the availability of information and the potential for changes to occur in the context of external forces or conditions that would affect the theory of change's viability.

GATHER EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT REFLECTION

By clearly distinguishing actions and changes and conveying assumptions about how actions will drive change, a theory of change helps stakeholders understand when and where data can be most useful. Data can include many types of information — including the firsthand experiences and observations of those affected by the work, implementers or others — as well as available research, knowledge or public data sets.

Having sufficient data, information and evidence enables productive reflection on a theory of change. The guidance and prompt questions below can help groups consider where they are in the strategy's life cycle or what aspects of the theory of change they would like to reflect on at a given time, and therefore what data can most usefully support reflection.

RESOURCE: For guidance and best practices about equitable approaches for data collection and reflection, see Chicago Beyond's guidebook: *Why Am I Always Being Researched?*[15]

IF IT IS EARLY IN A PROGRAM OR STRATEGY'S LIFE CYCLE OR THE PROGRAM OR STRATEGY IS ESPECIALLY COMPLEX….

Data and information that help to answer questions about beliefs or working assumptions inherent in the theory of change could be useful.	• What is the evidence that planned actions are (or are not) contributing to important short-term changes? • What is the evidence that short-term changes are (or are not) enabling progress toward longer-term changes? • What is the evidence that working assumptions are solid? Does evidence reveal gaps in logic? • What is the evidence that assumptions are upholding or disrupting historic and institutional bias?
Data that help to support understanding of proposed activities or implementation could be useful.	• To what extent are proposed activities taking place? • What is evidence that implementation is (or is not) happening as intended? • What about implementation is going well, and what are challenges to implementation? • Does implementation fit and speak to the cultural background of participants? • What factors are influencing implementation — such as available resources (funding, staffing, tools, physical space or items, and the like) — or the quality and clarity of implementation plans? • Are implementation adjustments needed? • What will it take to implement successfully?

IF A PROGRAM OR STRATEGY HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED FOR A WHILE….

Data that help to support understanding of progress or outcome achievement could be useful.	• What is the evidence that anticipated near-term, interim or longer-term outcomes are being realized? • Is there evidence of emerging, unanticipated or surprising areas of progress?

IF THERE ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS OR SHIFTS IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT…

Data that provide information about how factors or shifts in the external environment are relevant to the strategy's implementation and likely outcome achievement could be useful.	• What is happening in the external environment that is affecting or could affect strategy implementation or progress toward outcomes? • In what ways is strategy implementation or progress being affected (or how could implementation or progress be affected) by external factors? • How are opportunity windows changing in ways that could affect future progress toward outcomes?

QUESTIONS TO INFORM REFINEMENTS TO THE THEORY OF CHANGE

With some good data and evidence in hand, groups can productively reflect on aspects of a theory of change. For example, assumptions originally developed as part of articulating a theory of change may have reflected best guesses about what it would take to realize results and could require refinement. The table below identifies questions to help refine a theory of change.

FOCUS OF REFLECTION	EXAMPLE REFLECTION QUESTIONS
Strategy implementation	• Based on evidence, what is going well in implementation? What are challenges? • Are strategies being implemented as planned? What (if anything) is shifting and why? • How is implementation upholding equity, inclusion and respect for all backgrounds and cultures? • What are insights or conclusions about what it will take to successfully implement?
Progress	• Where is there evidence of near-term progress? To what extent is progress occurring as expected? What are emerging or unanticipated areas of progress? • Are some people or groups experiencing progress but not others? • How is near-term progress setting the stage for advancing longer-term goals? Are strategies or activities sufficient to drive outcomes for all and not leave anyone behind? • What insights or conclusions have we reached about what it will take to enhance progress?
External environment	• What factors are most influencing (enabling or impeding) progress or change? • How are shifts or changes in the external environment affecting (or could they affect) implementation or progress? • What are the decisions or actions related to leveraging or mitigating the external environment? • Does the external environment imply that adjustments to the theory of change are needed?
Underlying assumptions about how change will happen (particularly in the messy middle)	• Based on data about implementation and progress, what are the implications for current assumptions? What is evidence that the working assumptions about how change will happen are holding up? • Are strategies and activities sufficient to drive outcomes in the desired time frame? • Based on evidence and current experience or knowledge, what are opportunities to clarify assumptions? • Are refinements to the theory of change needed to better articulate how change is likely to happen?

Find links to real-life examples of theories of change at https://www.aecf.org/resources/theory-of-change.

Communicating Your Work: Tips and Examples

An effective theory of change process can help you arrive at conceptual clarity on the goal you are working toward, the actions that you believe will help you reach that goal and the pathway of change in between. An effective theory of change product can help you communicate these concepts to key audiences who have an interest in your work by clearly highlighting how they relate and connect with each other and the necessary conditions for success.

This section shares considerations and guidance for crafting a theory of change product, including tips for visualization and documentation and annotated diagrams modeling different concepts.

Tips for Visualization and Documentation

DESIGN SHOULD ENGAGE KEY AUDIENCES AND FIT YOUR PURPOSE

There are many ways to visualize your theory of change. How you decide to graphically depict your theory of change will largely depend on your key audiences and how you hope they will interact with it. Some groups will choose to create two versions — for example, one for the public and one for internal audiences. (See **PART I** for more considerations about these audiences.)

AUDIENCE	USES	AMOUNT OF DETAIL
Public	• Communicating your work to the public (for example current and potential funders, the media, policymakers) • ***See Theory of Change Diagram #1***	• **Graphic:** More general; depicts the key components of the theory of change and their relationships as simply as possible • **Narrative description:** More general; briefly describes the theory of change and underlying assumptions in simple terms that can be understood by people who are unfamiliar with the work
Internal	• Communicating your work to volunteers, staff, leadership and board • Onboarding new volunteers or staff • ***See Theory of Change Diagram #2***	• **Graphic:** low to medium level of detail; depicts key components of the theory of change and their relationships • **Narrative description:** Medium level of detail; clearly describes the theory of change and underlying assumptions; assumes that the audience has some familiarity with the work and will rely on the narrative as common reference point
	• Guiding internal strategy implementation • ***See Theory of Change Diagram #3***	• **Graphic:** High level of detail; illustrates more of the "messy middle" to clearly show sequence of change and relationships between all components • **Narrative description:** High level of detail; clearly describes the theory of change and underlying assumptions; assumes audience is very familiar with the work and is able to process more complex information about the theory of change
	• Guiding measurement and evaluation • ***See Theory of Change Diagram #3***	• **Graphic:** High level of detail; illustrates more of the "messy middle" to clearly show sequence of change and relationships between all components; calls attention to outcomes that have been prioritized for measurement or evaluation • **Narrative description:** High level of detail; clearly describes the theory of change and underlying assumptions; assumes audience is very familiar with the work and will rely on the detailed documentation to help inform decisions for evaluation and measurement

CONSIDER COMMON ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Arrange the components of your theory of change so they are clear

Whether you are aiming for a graphic that is highly designed and colorful or one that is simple and black and white, the first step is to lay out the strategies, outcomes and goals so that the concepts in your theory of change can be clearly understood.

- Many groups will use sticky notes to lay out their theory of change on a wall. Half-sheet sized sticky notes provide lots of writing space, are visible from across a room and allow users to write over words, play around with order and placement of outcomes and add new outcomes or activities quickly and easily.
- This process can also be done using standard computer software (most commonly Power Point or Keynote) by using built-in tools for inserting basic shapes, writing in text, moving items around and adding arrows if desired.

Make relationships clear by using arrows, colors and grouping like concepts

Use the following design techniques to clarify visually how specific strategies will lead to specific outcomes:

- Connect discrete strategies and outcomes with individual arrows or use a few larger arrows to indicate the direction of flow from strategies to outcomes. Consider adding the words “so that” next to arrows to clarify the relationship between strategies and outcomes or between short-term and interim outcomes.
- Group like outcomes together or nest multiple outcomes inside a box with a title describing those outcomes. For example, a single box could group three outcomes together that all relate to “Changes in Behavior.”
- Use colored shading or borders consistently to indicate different characteristics. For example, use different colors for strategies, outcomes and goals; use dashed outlines to indicate outcomes that you want to measure.

Use graphics, imagery and language to ground your work in culture

Using a visual metaphor can help draw connections and ground your work in the cultural context of the people and communities at the center of your work. If you are hoping to reach multilingual audiences, create theory of change versions in languages spoken and read by your intended audiences.

CONSIDER INCLUDING SUPPORTING NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION TO ACCOMPANY THE VISUAL

Pairing a visual depiction of the theory of change with a narrative description can help internal and external audiences more clearly interpret the visual. It also reduces the need for the visual to hold all the details. The narrative can provide details about strategies and activities, why outcomes and goals are important and underlying assumptions about how change is expected to occur. Groups may also find it helpful to include a brief summary of the theory of change development process so future audiences know who was involved and how they approached the process. Some organizations might choose to develop a narrative theory of change without an accompanying graphic.

Theory of Change Diagram #1

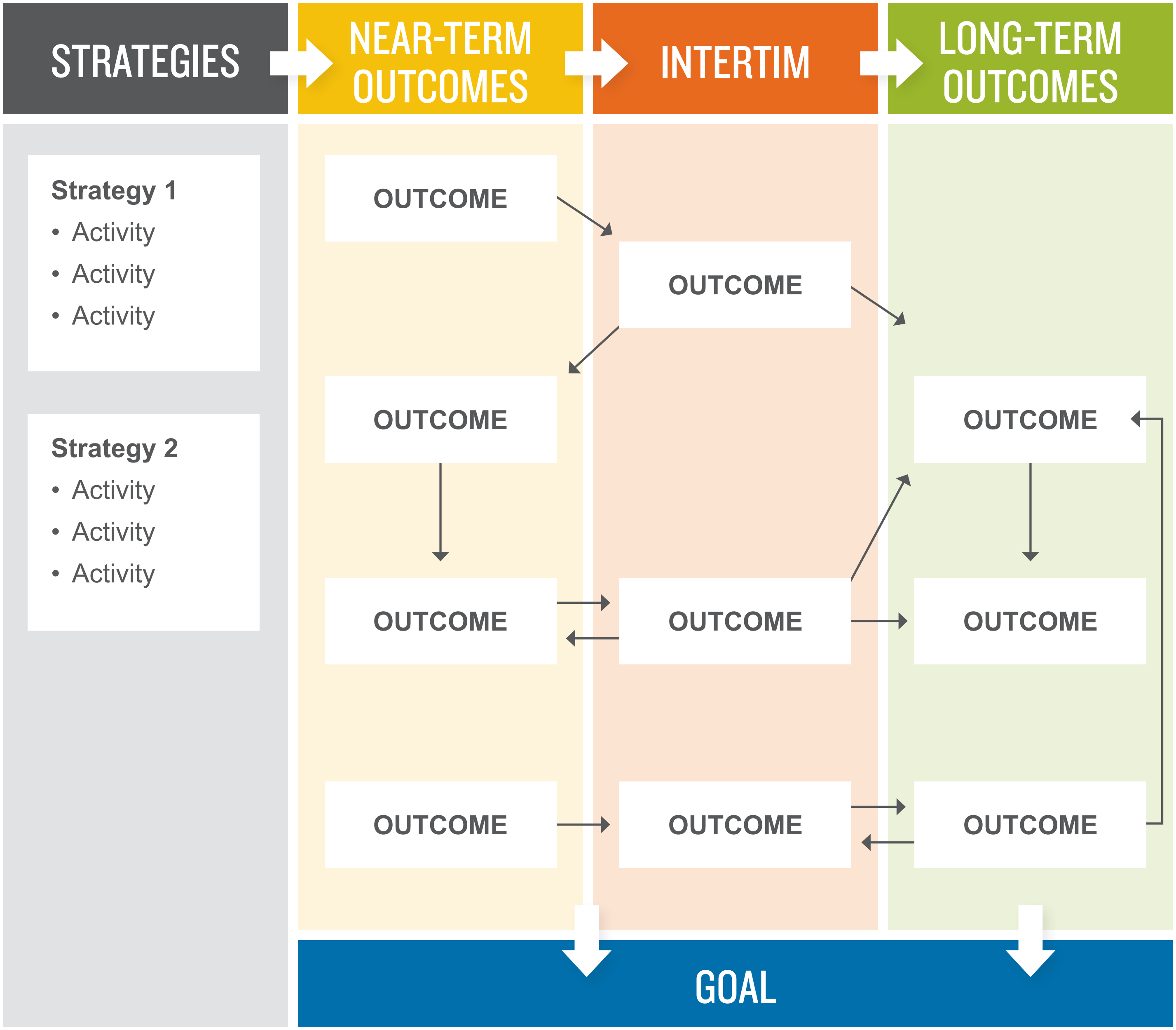
Description: This theory of change uses a visual metaphor of a person hiking up a mountain. It is read from bottom to top, with near-term, interim and long-term outcomes arranged along a trail on the way to a goal at the top of the peak.

Level of detail and possible audiences: Graphic could contain only key, high-level elements of the theory of change that would be easily understandable to audiences who are unfamiliar with the work and do not have the bandwidth to engage with detailed information.

Theory of Change Diagram #2

Description: This theory of change reads from left to right and top to bottom, as shown by the large arrows. Strategies and near-term, interim and long-term outcomes are visually organized within their own columns. Smaller arrows show specific "so-that" relationships between outcomes that are linked, including some that have cyclical relationships.

Level of detail and possible audiences: Graphic could contain a moderate amount of detail and be suitable for communicating the work at a high level with staff, leadership or board members. The goal is shown at the bottom of the theory of change, spanning across the three outcomes columns.

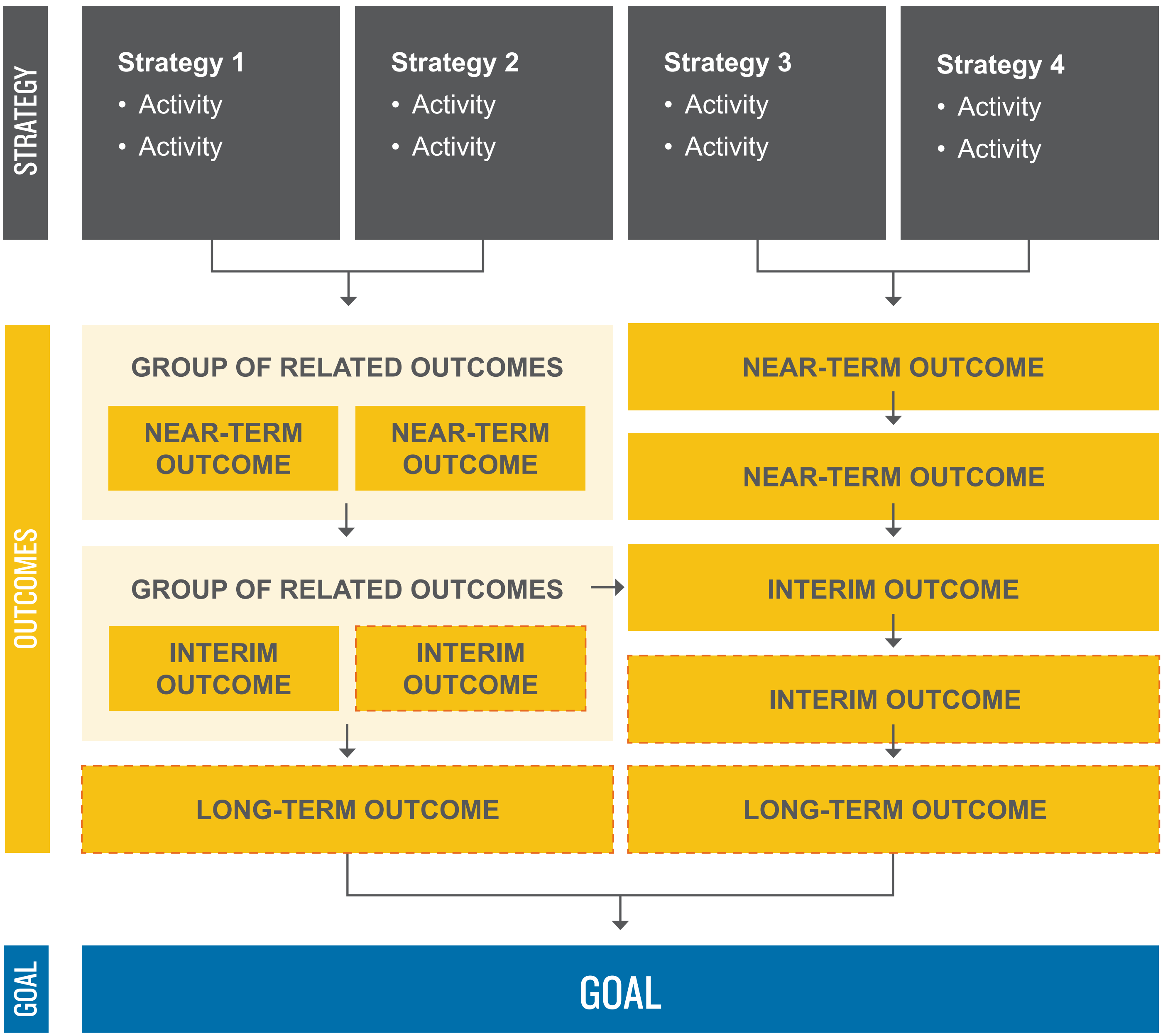


Theory of Change Diagram #3

Description: This theory of change reads from top to bottom, with strategies at the top flowing into outcomes in the middle section, which flow toward the goal at the bottom. Arrows show specific so-that relationships between linked outcomes. Similar outcomes are nested together within a larger box. Outcomes that have been prioritized are highlighted with a dashed border (prioritized outcomes could be those that are most critical for reaching the goal, or those that will be evaluated).

Level of detail and possible audiences: Graphic could contain highly detailed information, making it well suited for use by those within an organization who are guiding implementation or measurement and evaluation.

= Priority Outcome



Conclusion: You've Got This!

Developing a theory of change requires time and effort, but both the process and the product can be transformative for groups seeking to make change in a world full of complexity. The exercises, resources, templates, diagrams and online library of examples provided with this guide can help you navigate the journey, strengthen your understanding about your work and capture new insights about how change happens. With a theory of change in place, you can feel more confident that your work is getting you where you want to go.

Endnotes

1 Beer, T., & Coffman, J. (2021, November). *Guidance on developing assumptions.* Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from: https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Assumptions-Guidance-2021-Suggested-Website-Version-copy.pdf

- This brief guidance document defines the concept of underlying assumptions, explains the importance of articulating them when working on a change strategy (such as a theory of change) and offers examples and prompts to help groups generate and test them.

2 Gonzalez, R. (2020). *Spectrum of community engagement to ownership.* Facilitating Power. Retrieved from https://www.facilitatingpower.com/spectrum_of_community_engagement_to_ownership

- This resource describes a pathway to deepen communities' engagement in decision-making processes about issues that affect their lives. It is intended to help leaders from community-based organizations, local government, philanthropic partners and others to assess and transform community engagement efforts to advance equitable, community-driven solutions.

3 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015). *Race equity and inclusion action guide: Embracing racial equity: 7 steps to advance and embed race equity and inclusion within your organization.* Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from https://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide

- The seven steps in this action plan provide a clear framework for incorporating race equity and inclusion at every stage of an organization's social change work. This tool demonstrates how a race equity lens can be adopted by foundations or other organizations that work directly with systems, technical assistance providers and communities.

4 van Es, M., Guijt, I., & Vogel, I. (2015). *Theory of change thinking in practice: A stepwise approach.* The Hague: Hivos. Retrieved from https://hivos.org/document/hivos-theory-of-change/

- This guidebook offers a comprehensive, stepwise process for developing a theory of change, as well as tools and resources to support the process. The Hivos approach is well aligned with the steps presented in this guide, and groups seeking additional detail about core concepts and frameworks to inform the theory of change development process may find this reference useful.

5 Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

- The approaches in this book center around the "diamond of participatory decision making," which normalizes "the groan zone"— the space between divergent and convergent thinking, where groups often struggle through the messy process of considering and weighing different viewpoints and integrate them to reach shared understanding.

6 Beer, T., & Coffman, J. (2021, November). *Guidance on developing assumptions*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from: https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Assumptions-Guidance-2021-Suggested-Website-Version-copy.pdf

7 Lawrence, K., Anderson, A. A., Susi, G., Sutton, S., Kubisch, A. C., & Codrington, R. (2009, September). *Constructing a racial equity theory of change: A practical guide for designing strategies to close chronic racial outcome gaps.* Washington DC: The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. Retrieved from https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/images/Roundtable%20on%20Community%20Change%20RETOC.pdf

- This guidebook offers a stepwise approach to developing a theory of change aimed at reducing racial disparities in outcomes. It also includes a workbook of exercises to complement each step. The guide is organized around the "backward mapping" approach — beginning with the goal that is being sought and working backward to identify what must be in place to reach that goal. The concepts are well aligned with the steps in this guide, and groups seeking additional insights and considerations for approaching theory of change development may find it useful.

8 Keleher, T. (2009). Racial equity impact assessment toolkit. Race Forward (formerly Applied Research Center). Retrieved from https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/racial-equity-impact-assessment-toolkit

- This tool kit defines and provides sample questions to help organizations and groups conduct a Racial Equity Impact Assessment of their proposed policies, practices, programs, plans and budgetary decisions.

9 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019, June). *Introduction to the Results Count path to equity: A guide to the Accountability for Equitable Results framework*. Retrieved from https://www.aecf.org/resources/introduction-to-the-results-count-path-to-equity

- This introduction describes four skills that help leaders to achieve better and more equitable results. Part of Results Count®, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's competency-based approach to leadership development, the skills over time to become more powerful and effective in their work. The skills touch on maximizing one's contribution through data-driven and equity-informed analyses and performance measures.

10 Gienapp, A., Kelly, T. & Reisman, J. (2015, November). *I2L2: Impact = Influence + Leverage + Learning: A formula for change.* ORS Impact and Hawaii, Community Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.orsimpact.com/directory/I2L2.htm

- This discussion paper builds presents the elements of influence, leverage and learning as contributors to impact (referred to in the paper as a formula: impact = influence + leverage + learning, or I2L2). It offers a deeper understanding of each individual element as well as how they work together within large-scale change efforts. The paper seeks to make these concepts accessible to those who are designing and measuring change to help them adapt their models and achieve more powerful results.

11 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2007). *A guide to measuring advocacy and policy.* Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-guide-to-measuring-advocacy-and-policy

- This guide to facilitate advocacy evaluation covers such topics as how evaluation fits in the world of advocacy and policy; common context and challenges of measuring advocacy and public policy; how to develop an advocacy-focused theory of change; how to establish outcomes for measurement; and the importance of advancing the field of policy evaluation.

12 Ruedy, L. (2018). *Six models for understanding impact*. Democracy Fund. Retrieved from https://democracyfund.org/idea/six-models-for-understanding-impact/

- This blog post offers social change organizations six different ways of thinking about how their work may achieve impact, each reflecting a particular type of status quo and potential trajectory of change: transformative, proactive, opportunistic, stabilizing, preventative and palliative.

13 Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

14 Schlangen, R., & Coe, J. (2014, December). The value iceberg: Weighing the benefits of advocacy and campaigning. BetterEvaluation. Retrieved from https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Advocacy%20and%20the%20value%20iceberg.pdf

- This piece provides an iceberg metaphor in the context of advocacy and campaigning work to help make activities and outcomes that are less visible a more legitimate and recognized part of the work. Such activities and outcomes are often undervalued, as they can seem harder to name and measure, yet they undergird the kinds of changes that are more celebrated and visible, such as policy wins.

15 Chicago Beyond. (2018). *Why am I always being researched?* Author. Retrieved from https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/

- This publication offers equity-based approaches for community organizations, researchers and funders to address common power imbalances within research efforts. The guidebook provides practical suggestions for these groups to address these imbalances to mitigate unintended bias and generate valid data to benefit communities at the center of the research.

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